DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 351 137 PS 020 897

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TITLE Language Development in Kindergarten.
PUB DATE Aug 91
NOTE 9p.; Paper presented at the International Conference on Psychological Development and Personality Formative Processes (6th, Prague, Czechoslovakia, August 26-30, 1991).
PUB TYPE Speeches/Conference Papers (150) -- Reports - Research/Technical (143)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Child Language; *Classroom Communication; Classroom Research; Communication Research; Discourse Analysis; Early Childhood Education; *Kindergarten Children; Language Acquisition; *Preschool Children; *Teacher Student Relationship; Teaching Methods
IDENTIFIERS *Conversational Flow; Turn Taking

ABSTRACT

This study examined how modes of organizing conversation determine the type of knowledge conveyed to preschool and kindergarten children. Approximately 150 audiotaped conversations from 23 classes of students of different age levels from 2 to 6 years were analyzed. Children's spontaneous speaking turns or answers to teachers' questions were analyzed as a function of their relevance to the teacher's words, whether thematic, nonthematic, incorrect, or uninterpretable. Teachers' speech was analyzed as a function of children's speaking turns. It was found that information was not conveyed through the regular conversation structure in which the teacher asks a question, several children answer, the teacher reacts to one or none of the children's answers, and children seldom respect the speaking turns of their peers. There were relatively few instances of feedback from teachers to children, particularly when children's answers were incorrect, uninterpretable or missing. Children were required to express themselves briefly, and within the context of the topic. Further analyses of conversations in groups of 6 to 10 children were conducted. Results indicated that, compared to the original groups, there was an increase in speaking time for students. Results suggest that teachers should: diversify the objectives and topics of conversation; diversify the structure of the conversational group and their role in conversations; and individualize their exchanges with pupils. (HTH)

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ED351137

LANGUAGE DEVELOPMENT IN KINDERGARTEN

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6th PRAGUE INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE

PSYCHOLOGICAL DEVELOPMENT
AND PERSONALITY FORMATIVE PROCESSES

August 26-30, 1991

PS 020897

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The importance of the child's active verbal participation in the kindergarten classroom is well known, as a condition of his further adjustment to school (ZAZZO, 1978; FLORIN, 1988).

The daily collective conversations in most kindergartens constitute a privileged moment in a school day. Generally, teachers' objectives are multiple in these conversations: to make as many children as possible speak, provide them with a good model of language, bring them and have them brought new information, have a theme treated (to tell a story, or personal experiences).

Our purpose is to investigate how modes of organizing the conversation determine the type of knowledge conveyed to young children. About 150 conversations were audio-recorded in 23 classes of different age levels: 2-3 years, 3-4 years, 4-5 years, and 5-6 years.

Exchanges were analyzed with charts adapted from WILKINSON'S (1982)[1]. Children's interventions, spontaneous speaking turns or answers to teachers' collective or individual elicitations are analyzed as a function of their relevance: thematic, non thematic, incorrect, uninterpretable (inaudible or interrupted); teachers' interventions mainly included invitations to talk, information and repetitions or assessments of children's productions are analyzed as a function of children's speaking turns.

We shall examine first the usual collective situations (teacher with the whole class) and then some experimental situations.

THE STRUCTURE OF USUAL CONVERSATIONS

The question of cycles

Usually the educational action is defined as the repetition of a series of cycles represented as follows: the teacher initiates the conversation, for example by asking a question, the pupil gives an answer, the teacher provides him with a feedback - assessment, repetition of the answer, or comment - (SINCLAIR & COULTHARD, 1975; STUBBS & DELAMONT, 1976). This structure would permit the talk distribution among children as well as the monitoring of the development of a topic by giving information on the relevance of their interventions.

Actually, according to our observations, the reality of classroom conversation in the kindergarten seems to be much more complex.

The conversation structure is as follows: the teacher asks a question; even if the latter is personalized (which is rare: the sequences beginning with an individual elicitation often represent less than 10% of the whole), several children often answer; the teacher reacts to one of the interventions or takes the floor without answering. Frequently children take turns without being prompted, repeat what has just been told or bring new information. They seldom respect the speaking turns of their peers, and they are rarely prompted to do so by teachers.

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[1]See FLORIN (1991) for details.

Information is therefore not conveyed through regular cycles of question-answer-confirmation, unless we consider the class as a unique interlocutor which improves tentatively without receiving a teacher's feedback systematically.

Classroom conversations are constituted by numerous and very short teacher-pupil exchanges. Besides, the term exchange is not always appropriate, since almost half of children's speaking turns do not receive any answer from the teacher.

Feedbacks

There are relatively few feedbacks, particularly when the child's answer is incorrect, uninterpretable or missing. Therefore it is essentially in the graduation of teachers' non answers and conversely, in that of approvals that children can assess the relevance of their interventions. One might as well say that what can be told about and how it can be done arises, mostly, from the "implicit ", as several authors, particularly BERNSTEIN (1975) and WILKINSON (1982) have already pointed out.

The nature of the teacher's request

What type of information is expected by teachers in classroom conversation?

Children must express themselves briefly, and conversation does not permit long dialogues in which the adult would complete, rectify what the child says or would prompt him to develop his point of view.

Children must intervene properly, about the topic defined by the immediate context, which they do rather well; other types of interventions are likely to receive any feedback.

Furthermore bringing information is not really more valorized than repetitions or answers such as "yes" or "no"; the child's discourse is closely determined by the teacher's and his closed questions (with only one answer). Finally, from the formal point of view, children's utterances are not very complex: up to the age of 4-5 years, 60% of children interventions are isolated words and phrases which answer well the often closed questions of the teacher.

Thus, classroom conversation appears to be different from the exchanges the younger child can have with the adult in other contexts, when he is prompted to speak, when he receives immediate feedback, when his initiatives are encouraged, which conditions permit him to develop his linguistic skills and to acquire more knowledge about the world...

On the whole, the kindergarten teacher's language is formally simple and redundant in its content. But nothing indicates during school conversations that the 2-to-4-year-olds' teachers endeavour to make conversation easier by using a language more individualized, simpler, less informative than that of the 4-to-6-year-old children's teachers. We can also

wonder whether questioning, which has been proved important at the elementary school by other studies, is not an educational process too much used with young children, particularly before 4 years of age: aren't they unvoluntarily, in conditions similar to test ones in which only the most attentive, the "quickest" pupils can follow and understand the discussion.

So one can easily understand that 30% of children, in all our observations, do not participate in this rather rigid classroom conversation in which the adult firmly controls children's access to conversation as well as the choice and the development of the topic through his questions, his feedbacks or whithout any feedback.

We have found that the fact of speaking or not in the kindergarten classroom, in a collective situation, is mainly linked to the degree of self-assertion in the classroom and the degree of adjustment to the activities which are proposed. The linguistic level only plays a secondary role: it is true that the children who speak a lot in class have a good language level (in comprehension and production); but the contrary is only partially true.

Considering that verbal participation in the kindergarten predicts adjustment in the primary school, the fact of understanding how and why a child can or cannot talk at school is a very important matter in the research about academic failure.

For these reasons, we have worked on conditions likely to change the organization of the conversation and talk distribution among children.

EXPERIMENTAL SITUATIONS

Several modifications have been tested as to the dimension and composition of the conversational groups, in cooperation with some teachers:

- reduction of the group dimension to 1/3 of the class (6 to 10 children);

- "heterogeneous" or "homogeneous" composition of the small group: composition is defined by the number of speaking turns in the usual large group. Children are ranked among three subgroups: A = the children who often speak in a large group; B = those who speak moderately; C = those who less often speak . They constitute the "homogeneous" groups. The "heterogeneous" groups are constituted with one third of each subgroup (for example with a group of 9 children: 3 A, 3 B, 3 C).

When these groups are observed during their functioning and their productions are analyzed, the results are as follows:

- A reduction of the group dimension is a necessary condition for increasing the theoretical speaking time for each child; but it is an inadequate one for balancing verbal participation to help the children who less often speak, insofar as 2 or 3 talkative children are able to monopolize the conversation.

- The homogeneization of the small conversation groups according to the usual degree of usual participation in a large group reduces the

competitive pressure perceptibly: children who less often speak become very active participants in the conversation.

- To diversify the conversational topics and to allow children to talk about their personal experiences is a good stimulation for the expressive skills of the youngest on a semantic field more propitious than tales. Furthermore it incites teachers to individualize their discourse, to prompt children by open questions.

- To establish personalized dialogues and to have turn-takings respected in a small group can be done by teachers, when they are explicitly invited to do so.

In this way children learn very quickly the respect of the others' speech and conviviality (or social interaction) rules which is mainly profitable to the children who less often speak in the usual large groups.

The effects of these experimental modifications have been positive, and perceived by the participants, teachers and children, since the first sessions. But it is difficult with two or three sessions to modify some functioning habits, firmly rooted and daily implemented. These modifications are not evident, as teachers admit it, and require a long learning.

But, more basically, the main question is the one of the "educational model" (in the sense of PLAISANCE, 1986) to develop during teacher-children conversations in kindergarten.

Teachers must use the need of communication and expression of the children, give greater place to the individual, his specificity, his diversity and some adaptative flexibility.

There are two main reasons for that: first, (it's well known) a child learns language in talking, being active (and not reactive), as BRUNER (1983) has showed it; secondly, language competence and especially participation to school conversation are important conditions of further academic success, as shown by ZAZZO (1978) and FLORIN (1991).

The different components of communication competence must be developed through meaningful, motivating activities for children.

On the whole, the important thing is to favour the psychological functioning, the individual functioning of children and to subordinate to it the work organization in class and school. Not the reverse.

The question is not to choose between directivity and liberalism, but to be - in a way - directive and liberal deliberately, to break the rigidities and to introduce some flexibility:

- to be directive in the organization of the working groups: to operate a strict fitting out of their functioning, a regulation of turn-takings, a controlled gradation of the competitive pressure with a regulation of the size and the homogeneity degree of the working groups;

- to be liberal for the fitting out of the conversations, for the choice of topics and for the initiatives allowed to the children, in relation with their personal experiences and interests;

- to be flexible finally to take into account the individual differences and the adjustments to the language levels which are necessary for the good functioning of everybody.

SEVERAL PRINCIPLES FOR THE EDUCATIONAL ACTION

The major problem is to base the educational action upon the children's motivations and their need of communication.

- At first **to diversify the objectives**:

To acquire general knowledge, to learn narrative management, of course; but also to practise different areas of language competence: pronunciation, vocabulary, syntax; to learn conversation in a group, to express oneself there, to confront one's point of view with the others.

- **To diversify the topics and through them the language functions**:

To acquire the narrative structure, whether the matter is to tell a story, a personal experience or a classroom experience; to elaborate a common project; to develop imagination, by creating a tale, a poem, the dialogues of an exhibition of which the children are the actors or where puppets are used; to learn to participate to a debate and to argue one's point of view from daily preoccupations of children or from current events with which they are so often faced, on television and in family discussions; to use some activities of referential communication for creating communication experiences in the classroom, as DICKSON (1982) has done, for example.

- **To diversify the structure of the conversational group**:

That is at one and the same time its dimension, its composition and its internal organization, and particularly the communication network. A progression towards work in a large group would be introduced, particularly for the youngest children and those whose social and language skills are more limited.

Moreover, communication would become established not only between the teacher and the group, but also between the children, the adult just organizing the exchanges. For the oldest , autonomous groups would be used, for the conception or the execution of a definite project. Interactions between children with different competences and communication styles may create a "communicative pressure" (WILKINSON, 1982); it incites the young pupils to experiment various strategies for being understood and for obtaining from the others that they are understandable. The benefit of these exchanges for building new individual cognitive skills has been demonstrated in problem solving activities (DOISE, MUGNY, PERRET-CLERMONT, 1975), in knowledge acquisition in academic situations (PONTECORVO, 1988), and in

the development of communication competence (BEAUDICHON,1972, BAUDONNIERE, 1988).

To diversify the objectives, the topics and the group structure implies of course **to diversify the teacher's interventions**:

- **to diversify the teacher's role**: to control the group or to organize it; to be focused on the content or on everybody participation; to bring information or to have it brought by the children; to check the pupils' knowledge or to teach them how to argument and to take into account the other points of view;

- **to individualize the teacher-pupils exchanges**: the previously mentioned objectives can be really achieved through some exchanges in which the children are prompted when they need to be, in which everyone can realize that what he says is taken into account by the groups and corrected or completed by the teacher.

Such a view, which gives greater importance to the child's psychological functioning in the classroom, could be a condition of equality of opportunity for subsequent academic success: it could prevent a sedimentation of the learning difficulties at the beginning of the learnings period.

It implies a deep modification of usual practices and a good training for teachers, particularly in the areas of child psychology and communication technology.

The main point seems to favour "the learning person, his individual development, friendliness, personal autonomy" (LEGRAND, 1988).

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